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My pet requires a dental – what can I expect?

Dental work is an important treatment option for many pets. Mouth pain often goes unnoticed in animals, even pets in considerable discomfort will continue to eat. It is common for owners that have not seen a problem in their pets to comment on a significant improvement in their pet's demeanor, appetite and general well being after dental work has been completed.

Why is a dental needed?

Dental disease is an often slowly progressive condition. There may be:

- a specific problem in the mouth causing pain and increasing the risk of infection
- a general build-up of tartar that may result in periodontal disease (infections around the gums)
- a slow release of bacteria from the mouth into the general system that may potentially cause infections elsewhere in the body.

Is an anaesthetic necessary?

A general anaesthetic is always required for dental work. Unfortunately we cannot ask our patients to sit still with their mouths open and the use of scaling and drilling equipment in the mouths of moving patients would be potentially quite dangerous for both your pet and our staff!

Sedation is not appropriate as dental work often requires the use of flowing water to keep drills and scaling equipment cool and functioning. Consequently, we need to ensure your pet does not inhale any fluid and for this an anaesthetic is required to allow a tube to be placed in his/her windpipe to ensure easy and safe breathing throughout the procedure.

Please refer to your pre-operative anaesthetic sheet for specific information on preparing your pet for an anaesthetic and for information on the priority our practice places on providing the safest anaesthetic drugs and monitoring protocols that we can, as standard for all patients.

What happens during a dental?

Initially, any large lumps of tartar are removed from your pet's mouth, before the teeth are all ultrasonically scaled above, and just below the gum line. All teeth are then gently probed to investigate any specific problem areas. Sometimes extractions are required, such as for teeth with fractures going into the pulp, resorptive tooth lesions (neck lesions)

in cats, abscesses, cavities, and teeth with severe periodontal disease. Depending on the socket, stitches may be placed but these will be dissolvable and will not require removal.

Please remember that it is impossible to fully assess your pet's mouth prior to anaesthesia. Following probing your pet's teeth, further tests such as x-rays may be occasionally required and your vet will discuss this with you before the procedure or on the telephone should the need arise. Please make sure you are contactable all day on the contact number you have supplied us with. In addition, sometimes the extent of your pet's dental disease may be far greater than initially anticipated. In such situations it may be necessary to 'stage' your pet's condition due to the potential length of anaesthesia required and address a proportion of affected teeth initially, with a second procedure planned for a later date after a few weeks-months gap to allow recovery from anaesthesia.

Are there any risks to my pet apart from the anaesthetic?

Dental work, as with all surgical procedures, does carry with it a small risk, but thankfully complications are very unusual. The most common complications include discomfort following extractions, and infections, both of which we hope to control and prevent with appropriate medication with which your pet will be sent home.

There is a risk of trauma to the soft tissues around the mouth, particularly when extracting upper teeth just below the eye socket. Every care is taken to be as gentle with tissues as we possibly can.

Older pets have more fragile jaws. If your pet requires extractions of the lower teeth, there is a small risk that the ligament at the front of your pet's mouth (joining the two sides of the lower jaw together) could become weak, making the jaw somewhat unstable. This is an unusual complication, but should it occur, your vet may need to place a small wire, similar to a brace, around the lower jaw to provide stabilisation. This wire is usually removed under a very brief anaesthetic about 6 weeks later.

Thankfully, complications are very unusual but should your pet have any problems during the procedure, they will be discussed with you immediately and steps taken to ensure they receive the best possible care to help their healing and recovery.

My pet is quite old, is he at an increased risk?

For some patients, particularly older patients or those that are unwell, we recommend performing a pre-anaesthetic blood test. This can provide an insight into what is occurring inside the body and can uncover health concerns that cannot be detected from a physical examination alone.

The tests performed are quite similar to those performed by doctors before humans undergo an anaesthetic. Whilst these tests do not guarantee the absence of complications, they do minimise the possibility of complications during and after anaesthesia. Abnormalities in these body systems can have a major influence on how your pet responds to anaesthetic drugs and will give us valuable information on your pet's health, enable us to choose the most appropriate anaesthetic drug choice for your pet's overall condition, and guide us as to whether additional precautions such as placing your pet on a

drip, or providing specific monitoring equipment are indicated for your pet during his/her anaesthetic.

Our goal is to provide you and your family with the peace of mind you expect and deserve. A veterinary nurse will discuss the option of such a blood sample with you when your pet is admitted for surgery, and due our to on-site diagnostics laboratory, the results will be available to us before your pet proceeds to surgery that day.

We may recommend older patients receive intra-operative fluid support regardless of other tests, to help them cope with the extra strain an anaesthetic may place on their circulation in older age.

What happens after my pet's dental work?

Dental work is normally undertaken later in the day as it is not classified as a 'sterile' procedure in comparison to operations entering an abdominal cavity. Occasionally pets are still very sleepy in the early evening and in this situation we may suggest your pet stays with us overnight. In this situation, a vet will stay with your pet until they are happy that they are stable and comfortable. Although we are not at the practice continuously through the night, the vets take it in turns to be 'on call' and will return to the practice later in the night to administer any required medication, check fluid drips, and take any dogs outside to empty their bowels/bladders. Should there be any concerns about your pets condition, repeat checks throughout the night will be arranged.

Your pet will usually have been given injections providing pain relief and antibiotics. Sometimes these will need to be continued at home. Please inform the nurse when your pet is admitted to our practice if you will be unable to administer medication to your pet at home as there may be an alternative longer-acting injectable medication that in some cases can be used instead.

You will be asked to make an appointment 5-7 days after the procedure so that your vet can examine your pet's mouth and ensure it is healing appropriately. We expect your pet to start eating within 24 hours of the procedure. Should you have any concerns before your post-operative check, do not hesitate to contact us.